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Though the above report is compiled from discussions with many individuals, the conclusions are my own. Due to time limitations, I wasn't able to meet with as many individuals or representatives of organizations as I would have liked, but I was able to update observations from previous visits and draw some conclusions that I hope will prove helpful.

Many thanks to the Women's Commission and the International Rescue Committee for their efforts and for allowing me to continue this work.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Lawrence Haq
June 24, 1991

Report to the Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children and the International Rescue Committee

Status of Afghan Regugee Women and Children

Follow-up Visit; June, 1991
Cynthia Lawrence Haq, M.D.

Introduction

From May 31 through June 4, I travelled to Peshawar, Pakistan to meet with Afghan refugees and assistance workers to reassess the situation of Afghan women and children and to identify problems and any specific areas in which the Women's Commission could be of assistance. Additionally, my visit was to explore the possibility of forming a committe of Afghan women who could serve in an advisory capacity to the UNHCR and other organizations in order to directly represent the views of Afghan refugee women, a group that has had little opportunity for involvement in planning affecting them. This visit followed two previous visits in 1989, the first of which was to assess the overall status and issues related to Afghan women and children refugees in the Peshawar area, and the second of which was to facilitate establishment of the Afghan Women's Resource Center that was initially funded through efforts of the Women's Commission.

During this visit I met with several dozen Afghan refugee women, and representatives of many organizations as follows:

Ebrima Camara, Deputy Head, and Margaret Sinclair, UNHCR
Nancy Dupree, ARIC
Betsy White and Carla Grissman, Asia Foundation
Marilyn McDonagh, Patuni, Save the Children
Dr. Momand, physicians and nurses, Afghan Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital
Jenny McCann, Randy Martin and others, IRC
Shaima Chenzaie, Naheed Shaheed, Ummahat ul Momineen University
Teachers of Lycee Malalai Secondary School
Staff of Afghan Women's Resource Center

Due to family circumstances, I was also assisted in this visit by Isaac, my 18 month old son. He particularly enjoyed meeting the Afghan children in the nursery of the AWRC. We both appreciated the patience and hospitality shared with us by all the people and

groups with whom we visited, particularly Jenny McCann of the IRC who coordinated the visit and even helped accomodate nap times!

Background

It has now been twelve years since the war in Afghanistan triggered the migration of millions of refugees, over 3.5 million of whom live in Pakistan. The withdrawal of Soviet troops in February of 1989 did not lead to an end to hostilities and a return of refugees as hoped, but continued fighting and exodus of even greater numbers. Currently, there is no end in sight to the long war and the refugees as well as those who assist them, are showing signs of fatigue.

The chronicity of the war has led to special problems for Afghan refugee women and children as outlined in my previous report of Feb. '89. The problems of illiteracy (97% of Afghan women are illiterate), limited access to education or other programs encouraging self sufficiency or development, and cultural constraints limiting mobility have created special problems in designing effective programs to assist Afghan women. Additionally, limited access to primary health care, as well as cultural factors affecting the acceptability of contraceptive practices, has led to one of the highest birth rates ever recorded. Rapid birth rates coupled with improvements in child survival as compared to pre-war Afghanistan, has resulted in a growing population of Afghan refugee children who have known no life other than that of the refugee camps.

Though life in the camps is constrained and becoming more difficult due to cuts in assistance and food rations, many Afghans have come to appreciate a level of security and services not previously experienced in Afghanistan, and question whether they should return unless these same conditions can be assured in their homeland. Most refugee children enjoy greater opportunities for education than in Afghanistan, men have greater employment opportunities, and the people have improved access to health care services. Despite these realtive improvements, life in the camps is one of great hardship for the majority of refugees. Deprived of their usual sociocultural surroundings, their agricultural livelihood, and separated from family and friends, many merely subsist awaiting the day when they can return home and carry on with a more normal life.

Programs for Afghan Women and Children

Access to education, income generation projects or even basic health care services for women and children remains quite variable from one camp to another. In general, refugees living closer to urban areas or from educated or affluent families have greater opportunities available. For the majority of refugees living in rural camps, educational programs for women are not available, for children are quite limited, and only minimal basic health services are available.

Recognizing the need for educational programs for women several new programs have started or expanded. Within the IRC, there has been a substantial expansion in training women and children from pre-school through adult age. Over 1500 adult women were trained in IRC programs in 1991, but many more were interested and had to be turned away. These programs include English language, Public Administration, Health Education and training of pre school teachers. In early 1990, political tensions resulted in the destruction of a women's training center in one of the camps and temporary closing of women's training programs. This incident triggered a reevaluation of the approach to women's education and restructuring to assure cultural acceptability. Since then there have been no further incidents, and programming has continued at capacity.

The Lycee Malalai secondary school has increased enrollment to over 200 students, additional classes and laboratory facilities have been added, and more teachers recruited. Ummahat ul Momineen, the first university for Afghan women has also been established, and is co-sponsored by the Jamiat-i-Islami political party. This is the first institution offering college level training to Afghan refugee women and offers courses in the arts and sciences.

The Afghan Women's Resource Center, a training center established with the assistance of the Women's Commission and run by and for Afghan women, has continued to grow and increase offerings. So far over 300 Afghan women have received training in basic literacy, religious training, knitting and journalism, a newsletter is published, and an employment center is maintained. The center has developed a tight structure and leadership, has obtained additional funding through grant writing with the help of expatriate consultants, and plans are underway to begin outreach programs into the camps in order to reach those women in greatest need. This remarkable progress in less than two years by women with limited administrative experience reflects the capability and motivation of Afghan women with need for only minimal assistance. One remarked, "We need just a little assistance in order to help ourselves

and would prefer this to being nursed as babies, dependent on donations from relief organizations."

The improvements in programs for Afghan women are encouraging, but just begin to address the vast needs existing among the women refugee population, most of whom have no opportunities. Virtually all programs are overfilled and have more applicants than slots available for training. Whether cultural contraints are easing or programs have adapted themselves in order to become more acceptable, many more women would like and are able to receive education than there are positions for. As the Afghan refugee women are a "captive audience" not otherwise actively engaged, it seems tragic to miss this opportunity for training which could have favorable impact on generations of Afghans.

Current Issues

Funding Cutbacks and Donor Fatigue

Because of the protracted nature of the Afghan refugee situation and concurrent global crises demanding similar assistance, the world's attention has been drifitng away from the Afghan refugees to other more acute situations. The tradgedy and need for assistance to the Afghan refugees has not diminshed however, but continues to grow. Discussions with representatives of several relief organizations indicated that many have plans to cut back assistance in the upcoming year by 10% or more across the board. Most agencies have begun to hand over management of training and relief operations to Afghans themselves, which seems appropriate. However, this transition must occur carefully to assure that the Afghans who are assuming responsibility are adequately prepared.

Funding cutbacks will require creative responses from the Afghans in order to make up the deficits. Many Afghan refugees have been living on the brink of subsistence for many years. Cuts in food rations and health care services may result in a deterioration in the improved health status that has been painstakingly developed over the last 12 years.

Return versus Integration

Due to continued fighting in Afghanistan, the widespread destruction which has already occurred and the unpredictability of future conditions on return, few Afghan refugees seem to be preparing for a return any time in the near future, and in fact

several thousand additional refugees have come to Pakistan this year in order to flee ongoing fighting. Most agree that until relative peace, adequate food and shelter can be assured, few Afghans will voluntarily leave their currently difficult, though predictable circumstances. Discussions with many refugee women, and a study done in two camps (1), reveal that most refugee women feel conditions in the camps, though less than ideal, are better than in war torn Afghanistan and they see no point in return until they can be sure conditions within Afghanistan will be better.

Though some refugees have returned, these are in small numbers and to specific locations. Cross border relief operations have increased in the last several years in order to prepare for returning refugees, but because of continued fighting it has been hard to maintain close communication with or control over these programs. Though limited, at least some groundwork is being laid for the refugee's return.

For the situation in Afghanistan to improve, the war must end. This will occur only through a clear military victory or a political settlement. Many refugees with whom I spoke stated that there will be no negotiation with the Najibullah regime, and the refugees will return only when the war is won. They went on to explain that negotiating a settlement would mean that all the brothers who had died in the jihad had died in vain. The mujahedin continue to receive arms from the United States, while the Najibullah regime receives supplies from the Soviets. Some stated that even if external military assistance was cut completely, there are enough arms already available on both sides for the fighting to continue at current levels for another two years.

Because of these widespread sentiments, and no military victory or political settlement on the horizon, some relief organizations are beginning to discuss plans for integration of the Afghan refugees into Pakistani society as a more realistic option in the near future. I was not able to discuss this idea in much detail, but the option of at least partial integration and lessening of the refugee's dependence on outside assistance seems attractive, if appropriate places within Pakistani society could be found. This would require many new approachs to Afghan regfugee assistance.

Recommendations

Continued lobbying of Congress

The Women's Commission has already made several important contributions to improving the situation for Afghan refugee women and children. These include passage of a house resolution requiring more appropriate allocation of Afghan refugee humanitarian assistance to adequately address the needs of women and children. This measure has had an important impact in freeing financial resources for funding programs for women and children.

Many representatives of relief organizations with whom I met commented that because of improved funding, their programs for women and children were operating at top capacity and they couldn't do much more, given human resource limitations and cultural constraints. Though educational programs for women and children have increased, and many organizations say thay can't do much more, there are still vast needs for women and children which have not been addressed. These include educational, vocational and primary health care programs for refugee women and children in the camps. The focus of futher programming should be to increase Afghan knowledge and skills in order to become self reliant whether within Afghanistan or Pakistan. Afghans with whom I spoke are eager for methods to improve themselves and lessen dependence on outside assistance. In order for such programs to develop and expand, there will be **need not only for continued economic assistance to address the educational needs of women and children, but a priority placed on these programs as one of the most important investments in improving the future of Afghans.**

Education should ideally be available to all Afghans at least at the primary level. As the educational status of mothers has been shown to be the single most important factor in the health status of their children, education of Afghan women is perhaps the best way in which to improve their children's lives. Still only a small minority of Afghan refugee women women have any access to education. Many Afghan children also lack this opportunity.

Access to primary health care is still not uniformly available to refugees. There should be **continued efforts to improve access to preventive and curative primary health care services, including contraception.** An important aspect to continued access is the training of Afghan health workers. Many successful programs are underway, the numbers and skills of these health workers should be increased. As funding cutbacks for refugee assistance are considered, every effort should be made to **preserve funding for education and primary health care.**

The Afghan Obstetrics and Gynecology hospital is in continued need of financial assistance. This being the only hospital specifically for Afghan refugee women's health problems, and providing care free of charge, it has become quite popular as it has established trust in the community. Though the hospital has obtained grants from USAID and other organizations, it still has major financial deficits. Though the hospital has substantially increased the numbers of patients being treated, they now find themselves turning away several dozen patients per day. These patient's options are to go to Pakistan government supported hospitals where they are required to purchase their own medications which is often impossible. Continued or increased financial support for this hospital should be supported, as well as additional avenues explored that will allow Afghan refugee women requiring hospital treatment to receive appropriate care within the Pakistani system.

Though all Afghans want peace and a return to their homeland, there was little evidence that this is forthcoming in the near future. Many blame external interference from the Soviets and the West for prolonging the conflict, particularly with continued arm supplies. Others state that a unilateral cessation of arms supplied by the West would be devastating for the mujahedin. Given the history and current status of this conflict, one wonders if continued military assistance will ever be successful in resolving the situation. While a unilateral reducation of armaments may not be helpful, **all avenues for a negotiated political settlement to the conflict should be vigorously pursued as well as negotiations with the Soviets for bilateral cessation of military assistance.**

Publicity

The plight of Afghan refugees has largely disappeared from the forefront of American public conciousness due to many other global problems. The Women's Commission can play an important role to assure these millions are not forgotten, and they continue to receive attention and assistance. Public speeches, newspaper articles, and fundraising activities are important forums for continued publicity of the Afghan refugees to the American and international community. A follow-up visit by a delegation of the Women's Commission in 6-12 months with further recommendations would be helpful.

Afghan Women's Advisory Group

Discussions with many Afghan women and representatives of several assistance programs revealed that all felt the idea of an advisory group that could represent the views of Afghan women to relief organizations would be positive, important, and is long overdue. Ideally, this group could speak for Afghan women and children to groups planning programs both for the refugees within Pakistan, and on repatriation. The group could give input on problems that are not being adequately addressed and in developing strategies to address these problems most effectively, in ways most acceptable to the Afghan community. The group wold relate initially to UNHCR and UNOCA, but would also be a resource for ACBAR or any other organizations interested in assisting Afghan women and children, and interested in their input.

Several problems related to the formation and functioning of the group were identified. First, UNHCR representatives and others wondered if the group would be viewed with suspicion by political elements wishing to limit the roles of women and hence jeopardize safety of the participants. All Afghan women with whom I spoke said this would be of minor concern, and were willing to volunteer themselves as participants. They stated that if the group was kept low key, was not perceived as powerful, and participants didn't reveal information inappropriately, safety should not be problematic.

Another question was related to how a truly representative group could be formed. Discussions with many groups resulted in the following guidelines:

a. The group should consist of 5 to 12 participants for optimal interaction.
b. Each individual in the group should represent the interests of a particular sector such as health, education, rural women, income generation, children's issues, etc. These representatives would relate to larger groups in their sector in order to understand overall problems and opinions.
c. The group should include representatives from Peshawar and Islamabad in order to be truly representative.
d. No single political party or organization should be overrepresented.
e. The group should be facilitated by a consultant who could help them determine priority issues and an action plan. Few Afghan women have had any experience of this nature and in order to be effective, they would need initial assistance. Nancy Dupree, who has

considerable experience and the trust of Afghan women has volunteered for this role.

f. The group would be more effective with minimal financial assistance. Though the group would consist of volunteers who would meet approximately on a monthly basis, money for transport of women from outside of Peshawar, printing and distribution of written materials and minimal secretarial assistance would be essential for optimal functioning. A source of funding would need to be identified.

g. Agencies interested in working with the group, and their plans for interaction should be clarified. Though UNHCR Geneva has expressed interest, UNHCR Peshawar had mixed opinions on how such a group's input might be used in planning. Before the group is formed, we should be sure their input will be used, and not to no avail. Afghan women have been disappointed for too long and we should not stir false hopes that they will finally be heard, if indeed they will not.

Though there was much support of the need for such a group, the Afghan women don't know quite how to start and if they should until the purpose of the group and who they would relate to has been clarified. On the other hand, no organization was willing to acknowledge the importance of the group to the extent that the mechanism of interaction or support could be identified.

I suggest that we ask UNHCR specifically if they are willing to use such a group, and if they are, proceed with locating minimal funding for formation. The group could be initially appointed from a list of volunteers to represent the various sectors, with plans to later hold an election in order to make it more representative. I feel this group has the potential for finally giving Afghan women a role in planning their own affairs, but much work still needs to be done in order to start it properly.

References: